

Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran.

Edited by Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. 312p. \$45.00 cloth.

Civil Society in Syria and Iran: Activism in Authoritarian Contexts.

Edited by Paul Aarts and Francesco Cavatorta. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013. 259p. \$58.00 cloth, \$22.50 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592714001261

— Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Webster University Geneva, Switzerland*

There is no doubt that the two most prominent states in the Middle East which have consistently tried to challenge Western policy in the region over the past three decades have been Syria and Iran. Moreover, the fact that the two countries are of great geopolitical importance due to their respective locations in the Middle East, and have also had a close alliance since 1979, has increased their significance. Although much has been written on Syrian and Iranian foreign and security policy, the literature on internal developments in these two countries, especially Syria, has been relatively sparse. Two new edited volumes which try to shed light on their domestic affairs in the post-Cold era are *Civil Society in Syria and Iran: Activism in Authoritarian Contexts* and *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*. Both volumes focus on the theme of authoritarian resilience or upgrading, also known as recombinant authoritarianism. They try to explain how the regimes in both countries have been able to perpetuate authoritarian rule in the post-Cold War era when democratization swept through many parts of the world. Both works challenge the assumption that there is an inevitable linear political development of societies from authoritarianism to democracy, a view associated with the “transitology” literature of the 1980’s and 1990’s. Both argue that authoritarian upgrading has occurred in Syria and Iran through selective economic liberalization, cooption of civil society and control over new communication technologies. Several chapters in both volumes shed light on these topics.

In the Aarts and Cavatorta volume, the chapter by Line Khatib provides an overview of the selective economic liberalization undertaken by the Syrian Ba’th. Khatib argues that traditionally the Syrian Ba’th, consistent with its socialist and secular underpinnings, had been the main provider of support to the rural and urban working classes. However, over the past two decades the state disengaged and gradually delegated this role to civil society groups. Ironically, it was primarily Islamist charities and organizations which succeeded in filling the void and enhanced their role in Syrian society. Consequently, the country’s social and cultural fabric became more conservative during the two decades prior to the 2011 uprising. In a similar vein, in the Heydemann and Leenders book, Thomas

Pierret explains how Bashar Assad followed in the footsteps of his father by easing restrictions on religious groups and their activities, and then attempted to garner their support and channel their activities abroad by aiding the flow of armed Islamist insurgents into Iraq to fight Western forces in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq war. However, this strategy eventually backfired as the religious movements began to assert themselves and challenged the policies of the state by 2008.

With regard to authoritarian upgrading in Syria, Bassam Haddad’s contribution in the Aarts and Cavatorta volume focuses on the relationship forged by the Syrian regime with business associations. He asserts that with the privatization of state assets in recent years, many former state officials who had managed public sector entities then took control of the privatized enterprises. Haddad underscores that the Syrian state’s partnership with the business class came at the expense of the working class. The emergence of public-private partnerships meant that the business class developed stakes not only in the socio-economic sphere, but also in maintaining political order in Syria. Like Khatib, he points out that as the state abandoned its support for the underclass, poverty grew in the country. Hence, the state lost support and the leverage it had enjoyed over its traditional power base, thereby sowing the seeds of the 2011 uprising.

Salam Kawakibi looks at another facet of the Syrian state’s economic liberalization and cooption of civil society. He analyzes how the Syrian state attempted to fill the void as it gradually reduced its activities in Syrian society. As part of this effort, government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) were created to provide certain services to the people. In order to prevent Islamic charities from monopolizing the non-profit service-providing sector, a number of GONGOs were established and operated under the supervision of the Syrian Trust for Development, an umbrella organization headed by the wife of the president, Asma Assad. In the Heydemann and Leenders volume, Caroline Donati also deals with the interaction of the Syrian state with the business community and the utility of GONGOs to raise financial resources. She describes how monopolies were replaced by oligopolies as the state pursued selective economic liberalization and formed partnerships with the business community. In order to encourage investment from abroad, the authorities established the Syrian Business Council to cultivate links with expatriate Syrian and Arab business communities. Furthermore, the establishment of GONGOs also enabled the state to tap into funds provided by international donor organizations. For example the Fund for Rural Development of Syria (FIRDOS) secured three-quarters of its funding from the European Union. Arguing along similar lines as Khatib and Haddad, Donati also concludes that in spite of the Syrian state’s efforts to provide some form of alternative safety net for

the underclass, the social pact between state and society unraveled over the past two decades, with the gap between the haves and have-nots growing markedly. In the final analysis, the Syrian Ba'th lost support among its traditional power base, and economic liberalization failed to generate enough employment for new entrants into the domestic job market. It should therefore have come as no surprise that the majority of the protestors in 2011 were unemployed graduates and rural migrants who had come to cities in search of work.

With regard to selective economic liberalization and the cooption of civil society in Iran, both volumes contain several illuminating chapters. In the Aarts and Cavatorta volume, Peyman Jafari provides as an overview of the re-emergence of the private sector in the post-revolutionary era and its relations with the Iranian state. According to him, the entrepreneur class cannot play an independent role due to a number of factors. These include its fragmented nature and the ability of the state to coopt it through the privatization process as an increasing number of state-owned and semi-private enterprises have established links with entrepreneurs similar to the Syrian case, thereby creating patronage networks. In addition, these actors are also very much at the mercy of government policies that influence the business environment. Jafari asserts that as a consequence, they are reluctant to support political opposition and popular protests for fear of the adverse effects it may have on business activity.

Besides the Iranian state's efforts to coopt the business class through selective economic liberalization, Paola Rivetti studies how it has tried to tighten control over NGOs and created GONGOs to assert its authority in the social and economic spheres. She highlights the fact that during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iranian NGOs came under pressure and almost 100 NGOs which did not conform to the government's criteria lost their permits to operate. Concomitantly, the government introduced GONGOs depicted as community-based organizations, known by the Persian acronym SAMAN (*sazmanhaye mardomi nahad*). These GONGOs concentrated on economic development, and steered clear of social and political issues. Along with crony capitalism, the introduction of the SAMAN has enabled the state to re-entrench itself.

On the other hand, two of the contributions in the Heydemann and Leenders volume demonstrate how the Iranian state's policies have exposed contradictions and paradoxically weakened its grip on society to varying degrees. In his chapter on state welfare policy, Kevan Harris posits that the welfare system has enabled the regime to maintain its grip on society, but at the same time, empowered new social actors who are making demands on the state. To its credit, the regime's welfare policies over the past three decades have succeeded in

reducing poverty, diminishing the urban-rural divide and bringing down birth rates. In spite of these accomplishments, the growth of the middle class, rising expectations and demands for greater political and cultural freedom have bred discontent among a sizeable segment of the population. Harris asserts that the Green Movement which emerged in 2009 was by and large a product of state policies and the empowerment of social classes. In another illuminating chapter on the status of women in post-revolutionary Iran, Arzoo Osanloo argues that this has been a product of two conflicting currents – republicanism and Islamism. On one hand, the system considers the improvement and protection of women's status as a means to enhance its legitimacy, and on the other, it tries to limit the women's rights and activities that are considered contrary to Islamic values. As a result, contradictions and tensions have come to the fore, as women try to gain greater rights and assert themselves in politics, society and the economy.

Two chapters in the Aarts and Cavatorta volume challenge conventional assumptions about the centrality of new communication technologies in the 2009 civil unrest in Iran and the Syrian uprising since 2011. With regard to the Syrian case, Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr and Francesco Cavatorta state that one should not exaggerate their impact, and that they are not a substitute for off-line social networks. They underscore that face-to-face forms of contact, organization and mobilization that take place in mosques, coffee houses, universities and workplaces are critical for advancing a cause. With regard to the events in Syria since 2011, the authors argue that the use of new technologies helped spread the word and alerted world opinion outside of Syria about events in the country. However, the root causes of the uprising could be attributed to the deterioration in socio-economic conditions in the period preceding the unrest. In a related chapter on Iran, Ali Honari elucidates that the internet played an important role for the Green Movement, but the extent of its impact warrants careful consideration. In the period prior to the 2009 presidential elections, off-line social networks played a more significant role than online networks in informing and mobilizing people. In the aftermath of the crackdown following the elections, the internet played a prominent role. Word about forthcoming demonstrations spread by word-of-mouth, satellite television, and text messages. When the repression intensified in the weeks and months that followed, the Internet became the major source for disseminating information among people within Iran and beyond its borders. However, it did not have an impact in terms of mobilizing the masses to oppose the regime on the ground. In the final analysis, the new technologies alone could not ensure the victory of the Green Movement.

To sum up, these are two edited volumes rich with information and analysis on the various aspects and effects of authoritarianism in Syria and Iran. The Aarts and Cavatorta book is more focused and rigorous in its study of civil society, while the Heydemann and Leenders work covers a broader range of topics concerning civil society, but also literature, law and other issues. These can be interpreted as both strengths and weaknesses of the works. A few of the conclusions in the latter volume are open to debate. In a chapter on elections in Iran, Güneş Murat Tezcür's assertions regarding Ahmadinejad's popularity and victory in the 2009 elections could be disputed. Furthermore, in the concluding chapter, by Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Raymond Hinnebusch et al., the authors suggest that Iranian public opinion supported the Iranian president's foreign policy as long as George W. Bush demonized Iran. Again, this is open to question. Setting aside a few minor shortcomings, these two works are major contributions to understanding the internal dynamics of Syria and Iran. Each provides readers with an understanding of the root causes of the Syrian uprising and the current situation in Iran. They are indispensable and highly recommended for those who study the Middle East and follow the literature on authoritarianism in general.

Military Politics and Democracy in the Andes.

By Maiah Jaskoski. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. 322p. \$55.00.
doi:10.1017/S1537592714001273

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Studies of civil–military relations tend to focus either on the subtle problems of military influence that characterize developed democracies or on the more dramatic coups d'état that tend to concern less mature and nondemocracies. Only a few studies have explored issues of military obedience to political dictates in ways that could theoretically cross the developed/developing state divide. Maiah Jaskoski is thus doing us a great favor in testing explanations for work-shirk decisions short of coups on states transitioning to democratic rule. There is a wealth of information here, and the extensive interviews make it a worthwhile read for anyone with an interest in Latin America or military organizations.

Jaskoski addresses the question concerning the factors that explain a military's propensity to take on certain types of missions. She notes that existing explanations include desires for autonomy, resources, public legitimacy, and professionalism, but argues that none of them accounts for the behavior of the Ecuadorian and Peruvian armies under democratic consolidation. She argues that their behavior can be explained better by two organizational theory concepts: first, that organizations develop beliefs about

mission appropriateness that become sticky, and second, that organizations value predictability in core functions and will, when confronted with contradictory orders, act to maximize predictability for themselves.

The author argues that each military developed ideas about which missions are appropriate (professional) during the 1980s and 1990s. Then, in the 2000s, when each was confronted with some contradiction in its orders, they responded not by taking on the more professional, legitimate, or lucrative of the tasks available, but rather by pursuing tasks that—as Jaskoski puts it—maximized predictability for patrols on the ground. By this, she means that they chose behaviors that reduced risk both of violent encounters and of violating some command from higher up, leading to punishment. However, she does not include a comprehensive discussion of the relationship between the concepts of predictability and risk, making it hard to evaluate her operationalization of predictability. Most of her interview subjects expressed a fear of damage to their individual careers if they violated human rights (in Peru) or escalated the conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) (in Ecuador). Are these selfish motivations simply manifestations of an organizational impulse? Or are they more like a rational-actor model?

While Jaskoski cites some of the civil–military literature closely related to her argument, she does not incorporate it in enough detail to show how her argument fits in or is significantly different. She does not cite Elizabeth Kier's (1997) *Imagining War*, which first articulated the idea that military behavior results from the organization's culturally driven interpretation of political directions. She cites Deborah Avant (*Political Institutions and Military Change*, 1994), but does not use the concept of a divided principal to shed light on the behavior of organizations faced with contradictions. She also cites Peter Feaver's (*Armed Servants*, 2003) rational-actor agency argument, but does not explore it either as an alternative explanation or as a possible framework for her own explanation. In the empirical discussions, she does include some detail about the punishment relationships in Peru and Ecuador, but does not explain how her theory's predictions would differ from Feaver's.

The author rejects the autonomy hypothesis on the grounds that she wants a single theory to explain mission performance in both Ecuador and Peru (p. 7). It seems obvious from Jaskoski's own analysis, however, that there are a number of explanatory factors for organizational behavior. The problem with her framing, therefore, is that it assumes that agents must have a fixed preference ranking that always values one thing significantly more than everything else, rather than incorporating all of the agent's values into a cost–benefit calculation or determining the conditions under which each becomes salient.

In the case of Peru, Jaskoski acknowledges that the autonomy hypothesis is compelling. The military may